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THE TEACHING OF LYRIC POETRY

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IN Mr. C. M. McConn's recent study of "Students' Rankings of English Classics"¹ we find Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* standing thirty-third in popularity among the forty-one books there included. Just how far such a ranking should be taken as a gauge of our efficiency in teaching the lyric is hard to determine; but it does support the belief that some suggestions regarding methods of studying this type of literature may not prove amiss. I purpose here to offer some hints based largely upon my own experience in the classroom. I shall offer no apology for speaking very frankly of these experiences, for only by so doing, I am persuaded, are we likely to be of any assistance to one another.

First of all, then, let us consider briefly why so many instructors have found the lyric difficult to teach. Two obvious answers to this question at once present themselves: First, many teachers have not been so adequately trained in the study of the lyric as in that of the drama or the novel. By their very nature these latter forms lend themselves with fair readiness to comparatively elaborate schemes of treatment and present certain definite points of attack that are wanting in the lyric. Again, the lyric appeals primarily to the emotions rather than to the intellect; consequently, some instructors have gone so far as to declare that it is impossible to teach this form of poetry. Of course their whole contention here centers around the interpretation of the word *teach*; but inasmuch as it is obviously possible for the more highly trained instructor, with his finer appreciation, wider range of experience, and knowledge of technique, to bring his students to a fuller appreciation and a keener enjoyment of a poem, the whole matter becomes largely one of nomenclature; and we are justified, I believe, in using the word *teach* to describe the process in question.

¹ See *The English Journal* for May, 1912.

The exact boundaries of the lyric are hard to define. For our purposes, however, we may well accept the common and rather convenient definition, "A lyrical poem is a brief expression in musical verse of an emotion either of the writer or of someone with whom the writer identifies himself through sympathy." At the same time, we must recognize that, as Palgrave has pointed out in the preface to the *Golden Treasury*, "some poems usually regarded as lyrics, such as Gray's 'Elegy,' the 'Allegro' and 'Penseroso,' Wordsworth's 'Ruth,' and Campbell's 'Lord Ullin,' may be claimed with perhaps equal justice for a narrative and a descriptive selection." In this discussion I believe we may well be somewhat catholic and extend the term lyric to include much of the verse lying along the borders of our particular form. For our purpose we may also make use of many poems, especially those by Americans, not to be found in the little red-backed Palgrave with which most teachers arm their classes.

The assignment of lessons, especially of the earlier ones, requires very careful consideration. Most students are willing to prepare their lessons in English just as carefully as they do those in Cicero or in geometry, but all too frequently they are at a loss to know just what is expected of them. Sometimes they give the poems a more or less careful reading, use their Webster for the unfamiliar words and their Brewer for the allusions; then they close their Palgrave and betake themselves to fresh woods and pastures new. To meet the needs of just such students, the skilful teacher will devote at least a portion of each class hour, and that not always the last few hurried minutes, to the assignment of the next lesson. From visiting a great many schools within the last few years I have become convinced that all too frequently the teacher considers the anthology as three hundred pages to be taken in fifteen doses, twenty pages a lesson, and gives little or no attention to grouping for one day's discussion, let us say, several of Shakspeare's sonnets, or some of the various war lyrics which offer such excellent chances for comparative study, or the beautiful and somewhat impudent love lyrics of the Cavaliers, which are as typical of their grace of manner as of their general attitude toward life. Too many teachers exhibit a servile regard for an order established by

some textbook writer, and seem to consider it somewhat of a sacrilege to rearrange the material the better to suit their particular needs.

Again, the teacher's skill in assigning a lesson appears not only in his selection and rearrangement of the lyrics, but also in the choice of the preparatory material which he places before his students, to interest them and to help them toward an understanding of the morrow's lesson. Thus he will be careful to give them, when occasion demands, something of the setting of the newly assigned poem; or he may direct them to sources where they may learn more of the writer; or he may propose questions designed, perhaps, to challenge their curiosity, to suggest the excellences and the defects of the poem, or to bring home its significance. For example, I have found it well worth while with such poems as Bryant's "Waterfowl," Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar," and dozens of others, either to tell the class something of the history of their composition, or to tease the students with hints that will send them to look up these matters for themselves. Such an instance, to choose one of many, is to call attention in assigning the "Ode to a Nightingale" to the line,

No hungry generations tread thee down,

and to suggest that something in Keats's life may help in interpreting this particular passage. Or again, in preparing to discuss Rossetti's "Blessed Damozel," I have given pupils Mr. Hall Caine's well-known statement regarding Rossetti's indebtedness to Poe's "Raven" and have asked for a comparison of the two poems. Then, too, the teacher may occasionally suggest some source of a lyric and ask for a comparison between the poem studied and this source; as, for example, What does the "Penseroso" owe to the song in Fletcher's "Nice Valour"? or, What was Vaughn's influence upon Wordsworth's great "Ode"? or, How did Sidney expand his beautiful "My True Love Hath My Heart," which he enlarged to a sonnet and inserted in the text of his *Arcadia*; and did he thus improve it? Again, questions which send the pupil to a larger text, and thus tempt him to further reading, are especially worth seeking and using. Thus, such lyrics as "Where the Bee Sucks"

may induce even the lazier members of the class to spend some time with *The Tempest*. I have frequently enjoyed asking pupils studying Shakspeare's lyrics, whether the singer of "Take, O Take Those Lips Away" is a man or a woman; then, after allowing the discussion to wax warm for a while, as it invariably does, to send them to *Measure for Measure* for the answer. Other questions regarding the structure, content, and mood of the poem will be suggested later.

So far as my observation goes, most teachers begin the study of the lyric by asking some member of the class to read; and such a method has certain obvious advantages. I was impressed not long since with the success of a teacher who, in taking up one of the old ballads, had one student repeat the principal part, while the class joined in the refrain, "Binnorie, O Binnorie," thus reverting to something like primitive conditions. I have, however, sometimes visited classes where the reading, whether of a lyric, of a play, or of a novel, seemed valuable chiefly as a means of killing the class hour; and the students were allowed to read in a careless, catch-as-catch-can fashion, without being held strictly to account. No other form of literature, I believe, is likely to repay reading and repeated reading aloud more thoroughly than does the lyric; but it is also equally true that no other form is more easily spoiled by poor reading. Nor should the teacher invariably begin by reading for the class the poem to be discussed, as I have seen many instructors do. Such a method is as little appetizing as to enter a boarding-house on Friday noons knowing that fried fish, mashed potatoes, and canned peas are inevitable. The live teacher has many methods of approaching the day's lesson.

One thing necessary, of course, is to discover early in the hour whether the class has grasped the poem from the intellectual side. Most teachers are thoroughly painstaking in seeing that students apprehend the meanings of words and understand the allusions of the poem. The laurels, the myrtles, and the ivy; the fauns and satyrs; Hippotades, Neptune, and the Pilot of the Galilean lake—these must be understood if the student is to appreciate "Lycidas." But all too frequently the teacher places an exaggerated emphasis upon such points and goes about his task much as his fellow-instructor

in Latin asks the pupils to close the books while he proceeds to discover whether they have learned their *ambulo* and *laudo*, *exercitus* and *dies*, and the dozen other new words at the beginning of that particular lesson. Of course, the English instructor must be sure that words and allusions have been properly mastered; but by firmly insisting for a few days upon this requirement, and by judiciously determining from day to day how thorough has been the preparation of the lazy squad—the submerged tenth or fifth of every class—and then holding delinquents strictly to account, he may in time dispense with any recitation upon a considerable part of this largely mechanical work. The teacher must exercise ceaseless vigilance, however, in seeing that the students are faithfully carrying out this part of the work; though he may frequently learn what use they are making of such reference books as Gayley's *Classic Myths*, Brewer's *Hand Book*, and the *Century Dictionary of Names* without a daily test of each minute detail. Furthermore, we must ever remember that the mythology and allusions are useful as aiding us to understand the poem, and that "Lycidas" is not valuable, primarily, as an excuse for knowing Orpheus and Eurydice.

Frequently, in conducting a lesson in the lyric, the teacher contents himself with asking the student first to read, perhaps, one stanza and then to explain what he has read, following this method with monotonous regularity throughout the hour. "Read and explain," "Read and explain," "Read and explain" strike the ear with the dull regularity of a cricket's chirp on a rainy night in autumn. No one realizes more fully than I do, I trust, the importance of seeing that pupils have grasped the thought of the day's lesson. Sometimes a passage must be examined "line upon line, and precept upon precept." Thus, before a student can appreciate Keats's fine lines that begin the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he must examine them carefully, weighing the force of each word; and I, for one, am not afraid that such an examination will spoil for him the beauty of the poem. But I do feel most strongly that we must exercise greater skill than is sometimes shown in dealing with this part of the lesson. Occasionally the central thought of the poem has been summarized in some one of its lines, which the students may well be asked to discover. In this connection Herrick's

"Corinna's Maying" and Emerson's "The Rhodora" come to memory. Sometimes the explanation of certain phrases affords all the comment necessary to the complete understanding of the entire poem. At times the import of a poem is imbedded in a single phrase, the meaning of which may be made clear by reading it aloud several times, at each reading throwing the accent upon a different word. Occasionally a comparison of the reading of the line as it is given in the text with its variations in other editions is suggestive, as in Lowell's "Climbs to a Soul for Grass and Flowers," or in the "unbodied" and "embodied" "joy" of the first stanza of Shelley's "To a Skylark."

In his attempts to bring a class to a clearer apprehension of the thought of a poem, the teacher sometimes places too great stress upon the different lines and fails to give due emphasis to the poem as a whole. As the lyric is shorter than certain other forms of literature, it is less likely to transgress the laws of unity; but the skillful teacher will frequently consider with the class whether the poem possesses organic and formal unity. Is Daniel's "Since There's No Help" materially weakened by the change of tone in the last two lines? How is the humor of Bryant's "Robert of Lincoln" increased by the incongruity of tone and subject-matter? How does the carrying out of a single conceit affect the unity of Lyly's "Cupid and My Campaspe"? How is the unity of Longfellow's sonnet on *Milton* increased by the parallel movement of its two component sentences? What devices contribute both to the unity of structure and the unity of thought in Shakspere's *Sonnet LXXIII*, "That Time of Year Thou May'st in Me Behold," to Dekker's "Happy Heart," and to Goldsmith's "When Lovely Woman Stoops to Folly"? What is the effect of the Lincoln stanza upon the unity of Lowell's "Harvard Commemoration Ode"? These and a hundred other similar questions suggest themselves as topics in which the students become intensely interested, and through which they greatly increase their appreciation of poetic form. Thus, too, they may come to realize the unity arising from artistic restraint and suggestion, as in Wordsworth's "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways"; or they may see that in the matter of knowing just how much to say Bryant

occasionally gains as much from his compression as Whittier loses through his diffuseness. Sometimes an analysis of the poem, such as is suggested for "L'Allegro" in Chubb's *Teaching of English*, or the divisions of the "Deserted Village" given in Phillips' *Manual of English Literature*, is helpful; though we must ever remember that such an analysis is only a means toward the much greater end of understanding and appreciating the lyric as a whole.

In bringing students to such an appreciation, however, the teacher's greatest task lies in interpreting the verses so that the pupils may catch the author's emotion, that great *sine qua non* of the lyric. Here in the lesson of the day are half a dozen different verses, each permeated with the writer's feelings—how may the student be brought to appreciate them? Horace's old advice, If you wish me to weep, you must first weep yourself, applies no less to the teacher than it does to the author. The instructor who knows thoroughly and loves deeply the lyrics he teaches may accomplish much through his own fine attitude toward these poems he would have the student appreciate. Here is a beautiful lyric you have enjoyed and loved; you would have the class love it too. Read it aloud, reread, and have the class read with you. If repetition is the mother of studies, she may claim lyric poetry as a favorite child. All of us know how infectious is the latest popular song, and how, in spite of ourselves, we hum and sing it, sometimes to the weariness of both ourselves and of our friends. Well, lyric poetry may be made almost equally infectious and a thousand times more beneficial.

In spite of the protests of some of my colleagues, I am old-fashioned enough to believe thoroughly in the efficacy of class reading, especially of such poems as combine unusual musical sweetness and charm of movement with the more ethereal emotions. For example, the beautiful movement and delicate emotion, much like a single cloud upon a bright June afternoon, that mark Herrick's "To Daffodils," may well be imparted by the teacher's first reading the poem sympathetically and then asking the class to read with him; or, to cite a still better case, by repeated readings in concert a class may be brought, as in no other way I at least have ever discovered, to something of a realization of Shelley's divine yearnings

in the last stanza of the "Ode to the West Wind." "But," I hear a certain friend object, "such reading too frequently works like Jones's famous team, where one horse was willing to do all the pulling, and the other was perfectly willing that it should." This difficulty, however, may be obviated by care on the part of the teacher, who may accomplish much by a little well-directed encouragement and enthusiasm, by a judicious use of that most effective of monitors, the eye, in quickening the pace of the less zealous, and by a verbatim knowledge of the poem, which will enable him not only to enter more fully into the spirit of the lyric but also to give his almost undivided attention to the work of the class.

Furthermore, by knowing the text the teacher sets a very wholesome example for inspiring the students to commit to memory those best passages of lyric poetry, which are of immense value as "touchstones," to use Matthew Arnold's convenient word, in forming their taste. Occasionally one finds a pupil who seems utterly incapable of committing to memory, and to such shorn lambs the wind must be tempered. "Cudgel not thy dull ass, for he will not mend his pace with beating." But such cases are comparatively rare; and the memory work may be made a joy, if the teacher will at the very outset deal promptly and effectively with the student offering a half committed quotation and will train the class in the vocal interpretation of these memory passages. One device I have found helpful in this connection is to devote a part of an hour to discussing with the class the matter of spending one's odd moments to best advantage. I try to point out how much of our modern wealth arises from the utilization of by-products which were formerly wasted; and I have thus led up to a consideration of how each of us has certain vacant moments, in the mornings, on the way to classes, at night, which may well be utilized either in enjoying passages we have already learned, or in committing new ones. Such talks are, I know, of much value to certain students who are perfectly willing to work, but who have never learned such devices for making their work most effective. Of course all the devices and the helps in the world will not make every member of the class an enthusiastic student of lyric poetry; but I believe that "the number of such as may be saved" is larger than we

sometimes realize; and in such students lies the joy which must be a part of our recompense.

In making assignments of memory passages we may well vary our methods, sometimes indicating the passage ourselves, sometimes asking the class as a whole to assist in the selection, and again allowing each student to choose his own lines. The method last mentioned has the advantage of affording the discriminating teacher valuable evidence as to the growth of each student's appreciation. In this work of committing, repetition must play an important part, for all too often students are allowed to prepare a certain number of lines for the day and then to forget them as rapidly as they learned them. A few minutes of each period, or an occasional hour, are time well spent, both for refreshing the memory and for renewing the pleasure of a beautiful passage. After all, though, the most potent factor in securing good memory work is the enthusiastic and excellent example of the teacher himself. If he has committed but little of the best verse and recites it in an uncertain and inaccurate manner, if he does not love to return time after time in his spare moments to such noble passages as "Our Birth Is but a Sleep and a Forgetting," how can he expect to bring his classes to know and to love these better things?

But Cristes lore, and his apostles twelve,
He taughte, and first he folwed it him-selve.

How to deal with the student who shows in his memory work that he has failed to catch the mood of the author, is sometimes a problem. Occasionally one must stop such a student and try to bring him to an emotional appreciation of the passage he is mutilating. Of course one must not expect the pupil to bring to the interpretation of every poem an immense emotional appreciation; such ripeness, if it is ever ours, comes to most of us only with the passing of years. But on the other hand, the few great emotions by which we live are comparatively common property. Even if a student does not understand certain phases of life, he has usually known some emotion in good measure parallel to that expressed by the poet, which will help him to enter into the spirit of the verses before him. Thus, for most high-school students, life is forward

looking; but they all know the meaning of regret and, after a little skilful suggestion on the part of the teacher, thoroughly enjoy such verses as Lamb's "Old Familiar Faces." Indeed, few lyrics appeal so strongly to students as does Shakspeare's "That Time of Year Thou May'st in Me Behold." In this connection I recall very vividly the lesson I once learned from a county superintendent in a country school lying along what most of us would call the borders of civilization. It happened that we visited this school just as one of the pupils was reading in a high sing-song voice Whittier's "Blessings on Thee, Little Man." The superintendent stood it for a time and then asked one of the boys whether there were any wild strawberry patches in the neighborhood. The teacher looked up in astonishment at such a question. It had never occurred to her thus to arouse the sympathy, interest, and appreciation of the class. After the superintendent had discussed the poem with the students and vitalized it, he then asked the pupil to reread the verses—with results that may easily be imagined.

[To be continued]